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ABSTRACT

Language Acquisition is determined by a complex interaction of a number of critical input, output, and context variables. This digest examines these variables and reveals that cooperative learning has a dramatic positive impact on almost all of the variables critical to language acquisition. The examination looks at how cooperative learning transforms input, output, and context variables in the direction of facilitating language acquisition, suggesting the effectiveness of using cooperative learning to facilitate the learning of English as a Second Language. (JL)

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We Can Talk: Cooperative Learning in the Elementary ESL Classroom

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Digest

May 1995

We Can Talk: Cooperative Learning in the Elementary ESL Classroom (EDO-FL-95-08)

Spencer Kagan, Kagan Cooperative Learning

Language acquisition is determined by a complex interaction of a number of critical input, output, and context variables. An examination of these critical variables reveals cooperative learning has a dramatic positive impact on almost all of the variables critical to language acquisition.

Input

Language acquisition is fostered by input that is comprehensible, developmentally appropriate, redundant, and accurate.

Comprehensible. To facilitate language acquisition, input must be comprehended (Krashen, 1982). Students working in cooperative groups need to make themselves understood, so they naturally adjust their input to make it comprehensible. The small group setting allows a far higher proportion of comprehensible input, because the speaker has the luxury of adjusting speech to the level appropriate to the listener to negotiate meaning—luxury not available to the teacher speaking to a whole class. The speakers can check for understanding and adjust the level of speech easily when speaking to one another, something not easily done when speaking in a large group. Input in the cooperative setting is made comprehensible also because it is often linked to specific, concrete behaviors or manipulatives.

Developmentally Appropriate. Even if language is comprehended it will not stimulate the next step in language acquisition if it is not in the *zone of proximal development* (Vygotsy, 1978). The developmental level of any student is what he or she can do alone; the proximal level is what he/she can do with supportive collaboration. The difference between the developmental and proximal levels is called the zone of proximal development. The nature of a cooperative group focuses input in the zone of proximal development, stimulating development to the next stage of language development.

Redundant. A student may receive comprehensible input in the zone of proximal development, but that will not ensure language acquisition unless the input is received repeatedly from a variety of sources. The cooperative learning group is a natural source of redundant communication. As the students in a small group discuss a topic, they each use a variety of phrases providing the opportunity for the listener to triangulate in on meaning as well as receiving the repeated input necessary for learning to move from short-term comprehension to long-term acquisition.

Accurate. Accurate input—communication that is grammatically correct with proper word choice and pronunciation—facilitates language acquisition. In this area, the traditional classroom may have an advantage over the cooperative classroom, because the teacher is the source of most speech. Peer output is less accurate than teacher output, but accuracy in the traditional classroom is purchased by preventing student output, a price far too high for what it purchases. Frequent communicative output produces speech acquisition far more readily than formal accurate input.

Output

Language acquisition is fostered by output that is functional and communicative (Swain, 1985), frequent, redundant, and consistent with the identity of the speaker.

Functional/Communicative. If speech is not representative of the way a speaker will use the language in everyday settings, it will add little to the speaker's actual communicative competence. Memorization of vocabulary lists or verb conjugations does not increase fluency, because learning about a language is quite different from acquiring the language. Display behavior such as, "The clock is on the wall," or "This is a glass," is not representative of actual speech, and practice of formal, decontextualized speech creates transference problems that hinder acquisition. The cooperative group provides the arena for expressive, functional, personally relevant, representative language output that is critical for language acquisition.

Frequent. Students to a large extent learn to speak by speaking. The single greatest advantage of cooperative learning over traditional classroom organization for the acquisition of language is the amount of language output allowed per student. In the traditional classroom, students are called upon one at a time. During this whole-class question-answer time, the teacher actually does more talking than the students, because the teacher must talk twice for each time a student talks: first asking the question and then providing feedback in the form of praise, comment, or correction opportunity. Thus, in a classroom of 30, to provide each student one minute of output opportunity takes over an hour. In contrast, to provide each student one minute if the students are in a pair-discussion takes little over two minutes. In the cooperative setting, with regard to language output, we can do in two minutes what takes an hour to do in the traditional classroom!

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Redundant. Students become fluent if they have the opportunity to speak repeatedly on the same topic. Many cooperative learning structures, such as *Three Pair Share* and *Inside/Outside Circle* are explicitly designed to provide redundancy of output opportunities. Even informal, cooperative learning discussion provides redundancy as students discuss a topic with each of their teammates. There is not enough time in the traditional classroom to call on each student to talk more than once on a topic.

Identity Congruent. Practicing classroom speech that is not consistent with a student's identity will not lead to later fluency, because the student will not want to project the identity associated with that speech. Cultural groups will resist acquisition of the dominant language if the very use of that language signals assimilation that is being resisted. The less formal, peer-oriented, expressive use of language in the cooperative group represents language use closer to the identity of many students than the formal use of language practiced in whole-class settings. The more identity-congruent language facilitates language acquisition.

Context

Language acquisition is fostered if it occurs in a context that is supportive and motivating, communicative and referential, developmentally appropriate, and feedback rich.

Supportive/Motivating. The traditional classroom is far from supportive as students are "right" or "wrong" as they are called upon to answer questions before the whole class. Students in a cooperative group are more motivated to speak and feel greater support for a variety of reasons: (1) They are more frequently asked questions; (2) they need to communicate to accomplish the cooperative learning projects; (3) peers are far more supportive than in the traditional classroom because they are all on the same side; (4) cooperative learning structures demand speech; (5) students are taught to praise and encourage each other; and (6) students are made interdependent so they need to know what the others know. Because of these factors, students "bring out" their teammates, providing words or phrases to make speech inviting and easy. Cooperative learning provides a supportive, motivating context for speech to emerge.

Communicative/Referential. In cooperative learning groups, we communicate over things we are making. We speak in real time, about real events and objects, to accomplish real goals. We negotiate meaning. Our communication that is functional refers to what is happening in the moment. This communicative language facilitates language acquisition, and it is quite in contrast to the abstract "talking about" topics that often characterize whole-class speech.

Developmentally Appropriate. Some students are not ready to give a speech to a whole class but are quite at ease talking to one, two, or even three others. Speech to a whole class is often formal and less contextualized than speech within a cooperative group. It is easy to ask for a crayon from a friendly peer; it is hard to speak before the whole class in answering a question or speaking on an assigned topic. Speakers within a small group have more opportunities to enter discourse at the level appropriate to their own development.

Feedback Rich. Students talk to each other, providing immediate feedback and correction opportunities. Feedback and correction in the process of communication ("Give me that, "Sure, you take the ruler," etc.) leads to easy acquisition of vocabulary and language forms, whereas formal correction opportunities ("What is this?" "This is a ruler," etc.) lead to self-consciousness and anxiety, which inhibit rather than facilitate language acquisition.

In 20 minutes of whole-class, one-at-a-time interaction, a student is lucky to get one feedback opportunity; in the same 20 minutes of cooperative interaction, the student might receive half a dozen feedback opportunities—all in a natural context easy to assimilate.

A Natural Marriage

As we examine how cooperative learning transforms input, output, and context variables in the direction of facilitating language acquisition, we conclude: Cooperative learning and the ESL classroom—a natural marriage.

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